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collection, but it contains, I think, a profound insight. It says in more poetic words what I have been trying to communicate in this essay, that Kilkenny is a Renaissance city: it is all about light, space and intimacy. And if Kilkenny is to capitalise on the tourist Mecca that it has now become, then future developments must be carried out with great care and insight. With Renaissance insight, in fact!

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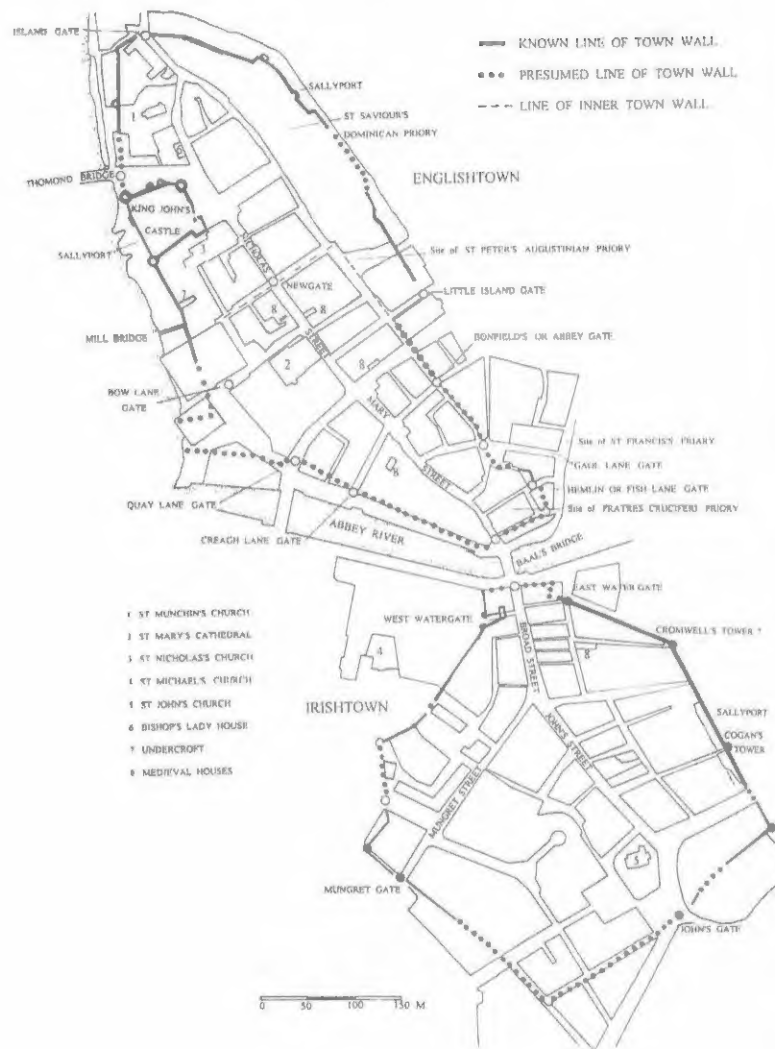
## MEDIEVAL LIMERICK: THE GROWTH OF TWO TOWNS

Celie O'Rahilly

ONE wonders what Limerick might have looked like in the early medieval period. We can only imagine an island on the east bank of the Shannon: its tidal location at the head of the estuary, some 60 miles from the open sea, and its proximity to the Curragour Falls meant that it was used as a crossing point. The island, later known as the King's Island, is formed by the Abbey River that separates from the Shannon above the falls and rejoins it further south. This, combined with the low ground to the east, rendered it an area capable of being easily defended. The southern end of the island is elevated and it was, presumably, here that settlement first occurred.

The historical sources refer to a church, possibly a monastic-type settlement, founded by St Munchin in the sixth century. The site of this foundation is unknown, the only indication being the present-day St Munchin's Church, located just north of Thomond Bridge. It is contrary to our understanding of the situation to imagine this monastery or church co-existing with the Viking settlers. The survival of this church may have been due to its relative lack of wealth, or perhaps it was abandoned and only later revived following the establishment of the Scandinavian settlement and the conversion of its inhabitants, when the early church was used as their cathedral.

The initial incursions of the Viking fleets up the estuary occurred in the early ninth century. While there is no evidence that they used the island, its location on the river and its inaccessibility from the land must have made it a suitable base and



Map of Limerick showing the line of the medieval walls, the location of medieval buildings and surviving medieval remains.

led to some occupation. The Abbey River could have been used as a by-pass around the falls. It was a hundred years, however, before a permanent settlement was established under Tamar, a Norse king who was a rival to the king in Dublin. From the island it was possible both to carry out raids up the Shannon basin and to control the Atlantic trade. The location of this settlement can be identified only from negative evidence. We know from the sites that have been excavated or investigated to date where it was not, since none has produced any Viking or Hiberno-Norse deposits. Thus it is more by a process of elimination that the location of the Viking and later Hiberno-Norse settlement can be placed in the area centred around St Mary's Cathedral.

Until sites in this area are excavated, there is very little to be said regarding the layout or economy of the early Scandinavian settlement. Only by comparison with Dublin and Waterford can we presume that it was enclosed by a bank and ditch. There have been some isolated Viking finds from the vicinity of Limerick and references in the annals to its Vikings are numerous. The district seems to have remained for some fifteen years in the control of the Limerick Vikings as a separate kingdom and was subjected to Dublin rule only following their defeat at Lough Ree in 937. It was ruled by Dublin until 967 when the settlement was taken over by the Ua Briain, after which time the Hiberno-Norse town emerged.

It is possible, even from the lack of excavated evidence, to reconstruct an albeit vague picture of the outline of the Hiberno-Norse town, which probably followed the limits of St Mary's parish. The present Nicholas Street and Mary Street extend approximately north-south along the highest ground in the vicinity and form the backbone of the thoroughfare known as the High Street. It connects Thomond Bridge, crossing the Shannon, with Baal's Bridge over the Abbey River and its alignment is not likely to have differed at that time. The town



Pictorial map of Limerick c. 1590, detail showing the Irishtown.

may have been surrounded by a wall at the time of the arrival of the Anglo-Normans. The Civil Survey of 1654 notes several properties whose limits are specified as being formed by the town wall. These properties, when plotted on the Ordnance Survey plan of 1840, were located along Bishop Street, which runs parallel to and east of the High Street, and also on Francis Street, which links these two streets. The cartographic evidence shows Newgate on the High Street where it meets Francis Street and clearly depicted on the Hardiman map, dated traditionally to 1590, is a wall continuing to the Shannon along Newgate Lane. This line also coincides with the northern limit of St Mary's parish. That knowledge of this inner town wall survived to 1654 is not easily explained, since the subsequent walling of the area to the north as far as the Island Gate would have taken place after the arrival of the Anglo-Normans some 450 years prior to the Civil Survey.

The domination by the Ua Briain and their loss of control of the high-kingship meant that Limerick became the seat of control of Munster. In 1101 Muirchertach Ua Briain, having donated his palace at Cashel to the Church, moved to Limerick and, according to tradition, built his palace on the site of the Viking Thingmót. Ten years later, in 1111, the synod of Ráith Bressail presided over by Gilbert, the bishop of Limerick, defined the limits of the diocese and recognised St Mary's as its cathedral: *is é Teampall Muire i Luimneach a príomheaglais*. This early cathedral church must originally have been located elsewhere: if the present St Mary's was the site of the king's palace in 1101, it is unlikely to have been a cathedral ten years later given that Domnall Mór Ua Briain donated the site to the Church only in 1194. The present structure underwent several building stages. Excavation here in 1992 proved that the west end, previously thought to be the earliest part of the building, dates in fact to the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century owing to the presence of burials with associated pottery that

underlie the west wall. The Romanesque doorway must be from an earlier building that was located further east.

The extent of the Hiberno-Norse town can therefore be seen as occupying the southern end of the island defined to the west and south by the Shannon and Abbey Rivers respectively, to the north by the wall along Newgate Lane and Francis Street, and to the east by the wall extending parallel to the High Street along Bishop Street and Sheep Street, enclosing an area approximately 14½ acres in extent. At what stage the walls were built is a matter of conjecture, but it seems from a twelfth-century description that Limerick was a fortified stronghold with gates, towers and houses. The exact limit along the Abbey River is also uncertain. When one considers the subsequent incorporation of the religious foundations within the walled area, the probability is that the original south wall of the town was located further north.

As was commonly the case in the Middle Ages religious foundations were granted land outside the walled town. The first of these at Limerick was a gift by Domnall Mór Ua Briain in 1172 to the new Augustinian priory for nuns. This foundation, dedicated to St Peter, was located near the north-eastern angle of the existing town wall, and is still referred to as St Peter's Cell. Later foundations during the Anglo-Norman period lay on either side of this. The Hiberno-Norse town had laid down patterns for the future.

The success of the Anglo-Normans' conquest in Munster centred on their ability to establish a hold on the town and to retain it in the name of the reigning English monarch. Although this did not in itself lead to control *per se*, it at least provided a foothold in a region that since the death of Brian Bóruma had seen almost continuous feuding between Irish chieftains striving for kingship of the region or high-kingship of the country. Initially this control was chequered: in 1172 Domnall Mór submitted to King Henry II by allowing in a gar-

rison; in 1176 Raymond le Gros entrusted the town to the guardianship of Ua Briain who, as soon as the garrison had left, burnt it and took it over.

The sequence of occupation of the castle revealed by the recent excavations there showed that, at the initial stages, the castle bawn was much smaller and was defended on the southern side by a massive ditch with an internal bank that was later revetted with dry-stone walling. The construction by the Anglo-Normans of a well-defended, strategically placed fortification must have been a matter of some urgency. Whether this resembled a motte-and-bailey is impossible to say, given its subsequent total eradication by the stone castle. This ditch does not appear to have remained open for long, since it was infilled not just with debris but also with lines of post-and-wattle that may have been property boundaries, implying that the ditch's use as a defensive element was short-lived. Post-dating the initial infill was the construction of a row of three sunken structures aligned north-south. The proximity of the ditch to the northernmost one would suggest that by the time of their construction the ditch was redundant. The resemblance of these sunken structures to ones found in Hiberno-Norse contexts Dublin and Waterford is striking, but the associated finds and stratigraphy put the building of the Limerick examples in the late twelfth century – that period in the town's history, from 1176 to 1196, when it had reverted to Irish control.

Despite the speculative grant of Limerick to Philip de Braose in 1177, it was not until after the death of Domnall Mór Ua Briain in 1194 that the Anglo-Normans regained any effective control of the town. William de Burgo, having married Domnall Mór's daughter in 1193, gained some ground in Munster and by 1196 the town was again held by the Anglo-Normans – a situation that was ratified by the charter of the Lord John in the following year. In 1201 the Lord John, who by

then had become the king of England, granted William de Braose the honour of Limerick, but retained the lands of De Burgo, the Englishtown (as it can now be called), the churchland and the cantred of the Ostmen. Between 1203 and 1210 there were various transfers of control between the Anglo-Normans – among them two of the justiciars or chief governors of the developing colony in Ireland, Meiler fitz Henry and John de Grey – and it was during this period that the construction of the royal castle in stone must have taken place.

An entry in the *Black Book* of Limerick is an order by John that post-dates 1199 when he became king and pre-dates 1210 when he arrived in Ireland, prohibiting the building of a castle on lands owned by Bishop Donnchad Ua Briain. This means that the castle had to be built beyond the parish boundary not just of St Mary's, but also of St Nicholas's, immediately north of Newgate, because that land, too, belonged to the bishop. Practical considerations – such as the location of the earlier fortification, the suitability of the site close to the river crossing, and the relatively high ground compared to the surrounding area – no doubt contributed to this choice of site.

The initial stone castle consisted of the north-east and north-west towers, with an entrance, later modified, all linked by a curtain wall that continued south from the north-east tower. Its southern end was built against the stone-revetted earthen embankment mentioned earlier, which therefore continued to serve as the southern limit of the defences. The Shannon formed a natural boundary to the west. A pipe roll entry of 1212 records the expenditure of £733 16s. 11d. on the castle. This could be interpreted as payment for the construction of the stone castle, since we may reasonably assume that such payment would have been made on completion of the work.

By the mid-1220s the castle had apparently fallen into a state of neglect, for in 1227 a clerk was sent from Dublin to make the castle habitable and suitable for use as a mint and ex-

chequer. It is possible that the beginning of the extension southwards of the bawn, which was done in stages, dates to this period. From the excavated evidence it seems that the first stage was the digging of a ditch and internal bank around the eastern and southern sides of the bawn area. The rest of the east curtain wall was clearly built bit by bit over the fill of the earlier ditch and the infilled sunken structures. With such poor foundations, it is not surprising that the wall needed constant repairs. Contrary to expectations, there was no tower at the south-eastern corner. The wall angled westwards and, unless there was a higher-level turret or bartizan, this must have been the weakest point in terms of defence.

As a royal castle with a garrison, King John's was in the charge of constables. There was no keep, the towers being used for accommodation. Its primary function from the later thirteenth century seems from the historical sources to have been for the retention of hostages or prisoners and by 1297, with the addition of the west wall, an underground chamber was built presumably for this purpose. The construction of the castle to the north of the Hiberno-Norse town left undefended a tract of land, St Nicholas's parish. This was eventually walled on the western side. From the way that this wall abuts the south-west tower of the castle, it was evidently built later.

The eastern side of the Englishtown was dominated by the religious orders. To the north of St Peter's the Dominicans founded a priory dedicated to St Saviour in 1227, while to the south a Franciscan friary was founded in 1267. The combined priory and hospital of St Mary, St Edward King and Martyr, and the Holy Cross was established by the *Fratres Cruciferi* in the early thirteenth century. This was located to the south-east of the town near Baal's Bridge. All of these would have been surrounded by their own walls. With the exception of St Francis's Friary, they were incorporated into the town wall precinct following the suppression of the monasteries. From



recent investigations carried out north of St Saviour's, it seems that the medieval wall of the priory terminated there and that a later wall of poor construction was added around the northern end of the town. On a map of 1752 by Philip Eyres this wall is described as 'extremely bad, and very narrow in many places'.

The walls, gates and towers of the Englishtown surrounded an area of 29½ acres. Within this were all the factors necessary for the survival of an urban community. Trading both with the rural hinterland and abroad took place. It was a thriving port: the harbour was located at the south-western corner of the town. Markets were held, although the location of the market-place is unknown. The linear street pattern was focused on the High Street with long narrow properties fronting it. Access to the rear of these was by lanes at right-angles to the High Street. There were three parish churches, the cathedral and four religious houses.

Across the Abbey River from the Englishtown developed the Irishtown, so called because of its occupation by native Irish who had presumably been dispossessed of their property. This suburb was walled in the period from 1310 to 1495, enclosing an area of 27½ acres. Excavations here have shown that medieval property boundaries survived up to the recent past. Although the excavations were limited to the rear of these properties, owing to the presence of eighteenth- or nineteenth-century cellars along the frontages, there is evidence that this area was primarily occupied by craftworkers involved in the manufacture of leather, metal and bone artefacts. There were some late medieval stone houses, but the majority were of clay and wattle or cage-work, a situation that continued up to the time of the Civil Survey. The street pattern of the Irishtown was Y-shaped. A main street extended in length from Baal's Bridge to John's Gate, with Mungret Street leading off it to the south-west. There was a series of lanes giving access to the

backs of the long narrow properties fronting the main street, lanes that survived up to the recent development of the area. There were no administrative buildings in the Irishtown and only two parish churches: St John's at the southern end and St Michael's outside the walls, to the west of the Water Gate.

The town walls of the Irishtown were built over a period of nearly 200 years. The murage grants imply that the earliest section was to the north, near Baal's Bridge. In a two-phase excavation of the north-western corner at Charlotte's Quay a portion of the wall and the West Water Gate were exposed, together with an inner water gate and a tower-house. The West Water Gate consisted of an arched opening flanked by two D-shaped towers. Access from the main street was by a cobbled lane, the surface of which was worn by cart-wheel ruts. About half-way down, the inner gate consisting of a square tower spanned the lane. Abutting this on the northern side was the tower-house. The area along the river bank seems to have been reclaimed gradually by building a series of walls parallel to the bank and infilling behind them.

All of these excavations in the Irishtown provided evidence of occupation in the medieval period. It is clear from both the cartographic evidence and the Civil Survey, however, that the houses were confined to a band along these frontages and that the area between this and the walls was open space, used as gardens or orchards. These areas became built-up only at a much later stage.

Further evidence illustrating the segregation of the two towns is reflected in the medieval pottery assemblages found on the excavated sites. Those in the Englishtown produced imported ware, of English or French origin, in greater or equal quantity to native Irish ware. On the Irishtown sites, however, the majority of the pottery was native with some imported ware, mainly from France and relatively little ware of English origin.

The political and economic circumstances of the late thirteenth and the fourteenth centuries created little need for expansion beyond the existing limits of the walls. Limerick's economic survival depended on its ability to cope with political change. The constant warring of both the Irish and the Anglo-Norman factions probably meant little to the townspeople, who remained loyal to the crown. In common with other modern cities, little remains on the ground that can be described as dating to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries other than a layer of relatively disturbed or sterile soil, often referred to as garden soil separating the medieval and post-medieval horizons. The reason for this may lie partly in the ground disturbance caused by the reinforcing of the inside of the town wall with a clay rampart during the sieges of 1690 and 1691 in the Irish town and probably in some places in the Englishtown.

David Wolfe in 1574 wrote a description of Limerick. In it he distinguishes clearly between the two towns: one he refers to as the city, the other as the borough of the city. Of the former he says:

*Limerick is the mightiest and most beautiful of all the cities of Ireland. Fortified by great walls of vivid marble, the city forms an island in the fast-flowing River Shannon and is accessible only by two stone bridges ... For the most part, the houses are made of squared blocks of black marble and built in the style of towers or fortresses.*

He says that there were some 800 or 900 households in the city, all but a few of them being Catholic, implying that the Reformation had had little effect on the townspeople. The castle is described as unoccupied and in decay. The Irishtown, or the 'borough of the city', is described as 'better fortified than the city itself'.

Perhaps the best picture of Limerick in the late sixteenth century is that shown on the 1590 map. Although this is inaccurate in terms of scale, many of the details it portrays have

been proved correct. During work done on the site of the present civic offices, a bridge of two arches was uncovered extending into the river towards a mill. There was a small gate in the town wall leading out to this bridge, the masonry of which was bonded to the town wall. Immediately north of the bridge was another doorway that gave access to an undercroft. This structure was originally built in the thirteenth century, but was later modified by the insertion of an arcade dividing it in two. The gate, the door and the bridge are all shown on the map, as are the differences in the house types: those on the High Street to the south of Newgate are fortified stone houses, examples of which still survive, while those off the High Street and to the north of Newgate are smaller and probably of cage-work. The monastic properties are, except for St Francis's Friary, all included in the walled area, and there is an inner wall extending along Bishop Street to the Island Gate. In the Irishtown the houses are mainly of cage-work with very few stone ones. The inner and outer water gates are shown, but the tower-house to the north is not delineated clearly, possibly because it is viewed from the back. There is no obscurity, however, about the location of the mural towers and gates in both the Englishtown and the Irishtown. Altogether the picture is one of two well-defended and prosperous towns.

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## THREE TOWNS: LIMERICK SINCE 1691

Eamon O'Flaherty

LIMERICK is a modern city built around and on top of a medieval core. The medieval city, however obscured by centuries of change, still survives in buildings, place-names and street patterns that have endured for at least 800 years in some places. But the modern city, as it developed after the treaty of 1691, added to the medieval fabric in ways that are particularly striking to the urban historian. The two towns of medieval Limerick became three in the course of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The Englishtown and the Irishtown acquired a rational extension in the ordered geometry of Georgian town planning called the Newtown, or Newtown Pery. Yet despite the spectacular growth and success of the Newtown, the medieval and the more recent parts of the city preserved their distinctive personalities to an unusual degree. The contrast between the narrow winding streets of the medieval city and the regular, planned grid of the eighteenth-century Newtown is a testimony to the ambitious scale of urban change in Limerick in the modern period. Few cities of Limerick's compact size offer such a comparable sense of the spatial unfolding of the different stages of urban development since the end of the seventeenth century. Fewer still offer a chance to see the

disappearance of the old city and the rise of the new.

By August 1691 Limerick had experienced two years of siege warfare. The city had sustained considerable damage by the action of the English forces in the siege of 1691.